

American Environmentalism and Encounters with the Object: T. Coraghessan Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*

Sylvia Mayer

In *A Friend of the Earth*, T. C. Boyle's satire about radical environmentalism, seventy-five-year-old Tyrone - Ty - Tierwater tells the story of his life as an environmentalist. Tierwater lives as the keeper of a pop star's private zoo on the American west coast in the year 2026, at a time when the biosphere has collapsed, when the climate is characterized either by uninterrupted rainstorms or by excessive heat, when the ozone layer is gone, when many animal and plant species are extinct, and, as a consequence of all this, when the basis for human diet has been dramatically altered. Thirty-five years earlier, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Tierwater had been part of the radical environmental organization Earth Forever! for which he had performed ultimately unsuccessful acts of monkeywrenching, of ecosabotage - mainly against lumber companies.

There are several devices that indicate that Boyle's novel displays a postmodern, parodic mode of dealing with environmentalist icons and issues: these are, for example, the novel's title, its ecologically dystopian setting, and the intertextual reference (Earth Forever!) to the contemporary environmentalist group Earth First! Additionally, the references to the history of American environmentalism (to nineteenth- and twentieth-century icons Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey, for instance), to the deep ecology movement, to politically influential texts such as Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*, or to the spotted owl as an issue of heated political debate, also testify to the novel's critical assessment of contemporary U.S. environmentalism.

The novel presents Tierwater's account in a sequence of chapters that alternate between the 1980s and 1990s on the one hand and the years 2025 and 2026 on the other. The chapters that focus on the situation in 2025-26 are presented by Ty as an autodiegetic narrator, while the chapters that present the events of the years 1989 to 1997 are focalized by him as well, yet related by a heterodiegetic narrator. This change in narrative perspective is one narrative means that points toward the novel's concern with questions of subjectivity and identity formation. Another one is the multilayered web of intertextual references which foregrounds the protagonist's subjectivity as

constituted in discourse. Still another narrative means of highlighting issues of subjectivity and identity formation are Tierwater's frequent descriptions of experiences of disgust and loathing, which foreground the significance of the abject and of the psychic strategy of abjection.

In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva develops her psychoanalytic theory of how the experience of the abject functions both in the processes of constituting subjectivity and identity and in the processes of creating and maintaining social and cultural systems. The abject can be defined as an "other", not as an object, which provokes fear, which threatens, which calls into question the boundaries on which notions of self and society are founded - boundaries that are articulated in the realm of symbolic signification, but are again and again challenged by the forces of the realm of semiotic signification. Most conspicuously, the abject manifests itself in phenomena such as "a piece of filth, waste, or dung" (Kristeva 1982, 2) that threaten the body's assumed cleanliness, purity, and health; it is experienced spontaneously as horror, disgust, and loathing. Abjection is part of the dynamics of subject formation, of the process of constituting subjectivity. It can be regarded as the psychic strategy that a subject uses to fight the destabilizing impact of the abject, to reaffirm his or her identity, and to avert the abject's ultimate effect, the confrontation with death: "[R]efuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (3; emphasis in the original).

Ty Tierwater's frequent exposure to experiences of disgust and loathing, which are articulated in his frequent - usually ironic, sometimes sarcastic - remarks about these experiences, show that Boyle created a protagonist whose subjectivity is strongly marked by encounters with the abject. Irony and sarcasm as responses to experiences of disgust and loathing signal that he needs to position himself at a distance from threats to bodily and psychic integrity, that the boundaries of his identity are strongly challenged. His simultaneous fear of and fascination with the abject shows a preoccupation with integrating these experiences into a notion of self and into a concept of the society and culture he lives in.

The necessity to reconsider notions of self and society and the inevitability of encounters with the abject are caused by the dramatic ecological changes that have brought about the hostile conditions of living in the years 2025-26. At stake in the novel are thus questions of subjectivity and identity formation in the context of an ecological dystopia. By employing abjection as a crucial narrative means, A

Friend of the Earth draws attention to the possible effects of ecocatastrophe both on the single human being's sense of self and on the dynamics of symbolic and semiotic signification. Moreover, Boyle's choice of a male protagonist and the fact that Tierwater's descriptions of experiences of disgust and loathing are frequently related to the presentation of male characters in the novel suggest that different concepts of masculinity are also at stake in the process of this environmentalist's identity formation. In the first part of this essay, I shall thus delineate how *A Friend of the Earth* conceptualizes human subjectivity and identity in an ecological dystopia. Confrontation with the abject shows that drastically changed environmental conditions destabilize both bodily integrity and received notions of the self. In the second part of the essay, I shall focus on how Boyle's text employs experiences of the abject for the purpose of addressing issues of male identity in the context of American environmentalism.

On the first pages of his account, in the "Prologue" that delineates the situation in the year 2025, Ty Tierwater introduces himself as someone whose conditions of living keep confronting him with experiences that challenge common notions of cleanliness and bodily comfort. Ty recalls feeding the animals in Maclovio Pulchris's zoo and cleaning up after one of the regularly occurring heavy storms. He remarks that "there are trees down everywhere and the muck is tugging at my gum boots like a greedy sucking mouth, a mouth that's going to pull me all the way down eventually, but not yet" (Boyle 2001, 1). About the atmosphere that has been created by the weather he comments: "The sky is black - not gray, black - and it can't be past three in the afternoon. Everything is still, and I smell it like a gathering cloud, death, the death of everything, hopeless and stinking and wasted" (2). Even the thought of the alternative to storm, rain, and darkness - namely sunshine - cannot provide him with a moment of relief, because, so Ty ponders, once the sun comes back it will "pound us with all its unfiltered melanomic might" (2). Altered environmental conditions spell pollution and, more often than not, bear the threat of lethal disease - several times Ty mentions the mucosa epidemic which had spread three years before and killed thousands of Americans, including his third wife, Lori, and which in the year 2025 is rumoured to have once more befallen the American east coast (see, for example, 72). Experiences of disgust and loathing are, however, not limited to confrontations with weather conditions outside. The effects of climate change have also penetrated the places inhabited by human beings, and they have made them almost uninhabitable. Ty's home is a two-

room house, of which the storm has “tom off the gutters and three-quarters of the shingles” (6). There are

smells of mold - what else? - and rats. The rats - an R-selected species, big litters, highly mobile, selected for any environment - are thriving, multiplying like there's no tomorrow [...]. They have an underlying smell, a furtive smell, old sweat socks balled up on the floor of the high-school locker room, drains that need cleaning, meat sauce dried onto the plate and then reliquefied with a spray of water. It's a quiet stink, nothing like the hyena when she's wet, which is all the time now, and I forgive the rats that much. (6)

In the restaurant where Ty meets his former wife, Andrea, he is greeted by another insulting smell, by “a funk of body heat and the kind of humidity you'd expect from the Black Hole of Calcutta” (9). In the course of their meal they have to put up with increasing dampness since the heavy rain starts to seep into the building from whichever direction possible.

These many insults to the senses show that ecological changes have dramatically altered received patterns of sensual experience and that Tierwater and his contemporaries are constantly forced to pay closest attention to weather conditions. The body is exposed to dirt, wetness, stink, and prolonged phases of darkness; there is hardly any relief for the senses. The permeating quality of these experiences challenges the boundaries between body and outside world and asks for their redrawing. The fact that they surface so frequently in Tierwater's account shows that Boyle's protagonist has not yet been able to accommodate to these changes, that he is preoccupied with integrating them into a new notion of self. He suffers from a tension between, on the one hand, bodily memories of former times, which can be regarded as “cleaner” and “healthier”, and, on the other hand, the experiences of the present moment of ecological disaster, which is characterized by the abject threatening by means of the spectres of disease and death. Moreover, Ty's remarks signal that he and his contemporaries in the year 2025 can no longer rely on the regularity of seasonal change or the day/night cycle which were still intact in the 1980s and 1990s. The fact that all these sensual assaults invade the home shows that its function to provide shelter and, as Gaston Bachelard argues, a space for dreaming, a space for the imagination to muster the strength necessary to perform healthily and successfully in the world (see Bachelard [1958] 1994), has been largely lost. In 2025 both body and mind have to adapt to this loss of received temporal patterns and spatial refuge. The collapse of the biosphere calls for new

anthropological conceptualizations and for a new conceptualization of the relation between nature and culture.

The concepts of nature, culture, and the human that have dominated Western societies' ontological and ethical thought as well as the socioeconomic practices founded upon them, have been structured by dualistic thought since the beginning of the modern era and the emergence of the modern sciences in the Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see Pepper 1997, 123-165). According to ecological philosopher Val Plumwood, the root dualism of nature versus culture, which regards nature as strictly separate from and inferior to culture, has spawned a whole system of dichotomies, among them matter versus reason - or body versus mind -, female versus male, and master versus slave (see 1997, 41-68). In the ontological system that has dominated modern Western history, the human being is positioned as separate from the rest of nature. It is conceptualized as an essentially rational, and, by implication, cultural, that is non-natural, being. The ethical systems, which operate on such an ontological premise, are strictly interpersonal and instrumentalist systems, which is to say that they do not address the question of expanding the moral universe in terms of including (parts of) non-human nature and that they neglect addressing the problem of a finite nonhuman resource base (for an overview of the development within the field of practical philosophy and environmental ethics see Krebs 1999 and, for the Anglo-American context, Nash 1989). In contrast to this dualistic paradigm, ecologically oriented ontological and ethical thought has proceeded from the premise that nature and culture are interrelated and that their relationship is characterized by reciprocity. The anthropological notion that follows from this premise is that human beings are a part of nature and dependent on it, that they are not only firmly rooted in processes of cultural production and consumption, but also in ecological processes that involve both the human and the nonhuman world. In this context Plumwood develops the concept of the "ecological self" (1997, 142), a notion of the self as relational or mutual, which recognizes not only the human other, but also the natural other "as another self, a distinct centre of agency and resistance, whose needs, goals and intrinsic value place ethical limits on the self and must be considered and respected" (145).

The concept of the relational self, the concept of the human being as part of nature, as body *and* mind, emerges in *A Friend of the Earth* most significantly by means of foregrounding sensual experience in the constitution of subjectivity - sensual experience that illustrates the importance of the strategy of abjection. In many passages Boyle, for

example, uses the depiction of experiences of the old body, the sick body, the body in pain, and the body as a victim of pollution or of insufficient diet for the purpose of rejecting the concept of the human as an essentially rational being. His protagonist Ty Tierwater thematizes his failing body again and again: "I'm an old man. My teeth hurt, my knee hurts, my back - and there's a dull inchoate intimation of pain just starting to make its presence known deep in the intertwined muscles of my stitched-up forearm" (72). In another passage, set in November 2025, he has to spend an extended period of time on the toilet. The seventy-five-year-old man has resigned himself to the effects of age - such as constipation - and he calmly accepts that he has "to sit here waiting it out, [...] my own familiar odor rising poisonously about me" (75). While sitting there, he reflects on the deaths of various loved ones. He remembers the death of his uncle Sol at a moment when they were working together on his Safari ranch in San Diego, "both up to our elbows in urine-drenched straw and the exotic shit of exotic beasts" (72-73), and he remembers the death of his third wife Lori, "the mucosa so thick in her lungs and throat she couldn't draw a breath" (73). These death-related memories that originate in disgust-provoking sensual perceptions and the realization of the effects of old age on his own body all demonstrate the power of the abject for both the constitution of subjectivity and for the process of identity formation. Moreover, the fact that they make Ty sneer at the "promise" of the medical sciences to be able to cure "all disease" (73) indicates that he has long given up on notions of scientific and technological progress that are rooted in the West's dualistic thought and have been foundational for its social and economic development in the modern era. Ty has relinquished notions that are, ultimately, founded in the Baconian creed of power over nature and its accompanying instrumentalist ethics.

In the years 2025-26, both nonhuman nature and human nature - as concretized in the body - have reasserted themselves. The changes in local, regional, and global ecosystems have led to hostile living conditions and to the acknowledgement of nature's ultimately superior power; the natural environment has defied human aspiration to exert total control, and the body still proves to be beyond the total control of the mind. Ironically, the majority of American society in the years 2025 and 2026 does not acknowledge these facts. Ty's frequent descriptions of his contemporaries who still pursue twentieth century Western consumerist attitudes and practices in spite of the drastically limited resource availability demonstrate that insight does not even prevail in such ecologically dystopian conditions, in a situation that

has proved environmentalists' earlier warnings to be correct. These observations underline the weakness of the human mind and parody a concept of the human that regards rationality as its central defining feature.

Ty's realization of how little the mind is able to achieve and how wrong it is to define the human as separate from the rest of nature also becomes explicit in his many rejections of the absolute ontological gap between human and animal. When Ty introduces himself, "I'm an animal man" (1), at the beginning of the novel, he seems to refer only to his job as zookeeper. In the course of the novel, however, the foregrounding of sensual perception, of bodily experience, and the repeated comparisons of human beings and animals make clear that he no longer accepts the conceptual dualism. He remains aware of differences between human and animal, but rejects the hierarchical dualist notion that legitimizes absolute human domination. His remark "I'm an animal man" must ultimately be understood as an acknowledgment of the close evolutionary relations between the species. Another comparison of human and animal nature that Ty makes again illustrates Boyle's reliance on the narrative strategy of employing encounters with the abject. Memories of prison emerge in a situation when Ty is again preoccupied with the problem of constipation:

My guts are rumbling: gas, that's what it is. If I lie absolutely still, it'll work through all the anfractuious turns and twists down there and find its inevitable way to the point of release. And what am I thinking? That's methane gas, a natural pollutant, same as you get from landfills, feedlots and termite mounds, and it persists in the atmosphere for ten years, one more fart's worth of global warming. I'm a mess and I know it. Jewish guilt, Catholic guilt, enviro-eco-capitalistico guilt: I can't even expel gas in peace. Of course, guilt itself is a luxury. In prison we didn't concern ourselves overmuch about environmental degradation or the rights of nature or anything else, for that matter. They penned us up like animals, and we shat and pissed and jerked off and blew hurricanes out our rectums, and if the world collapsed as a result, all the better: at least we would be out. (106-107)

With its focus on the body's excretions and on the link between human and animal this passage rejects the human-animal dualism as it firmly locates both within the realm of organic nature. By reflecting on the effects of methane gas, which is produced by both human and animal organisms, Ty depicts humans as well as animals as participants of the biochemical, ecosystemic dynamics.

Finally, in addition to rejecting the human-animal dualism and to expressing a critique of a rationalist ontology, the passage critically

addresses a third issue that is of central significance to the novel. It provides one instance of critical reflection upon manifestations of U.S. radical environmentalism in the twentieth century. By recalling that during his time in prison any concern about the environment had vanished, Tierwater calls into question the soundness of the motivation of a radical environmentalist. Ty went to prison after committing several acts of monkeywrenching and after spending a month in the wilderness with his wife Andrea - naked, and without provisions or tools. Both his acts of ecosabotage and his immersion in the wilderness point toward the motivational force of the principles of Deep Ecology. In contrast to what they call "shallow ecology", deep ecologists try to transcend an anthropocentric environmentalist focus on problems of pollution and resource depletion in favour of a biocentric stance that attributes intrinsic value to human and nonhuman nature alike, a stance that no longer centres on the human being and his or her interests. For deep ecologists the principle of the primacy of all living things has led

to emphasize issues of wilderness, population, and industrialization. They argue that a new kind of philosophy and new forms of social action are now required to reverse the course of the urban and industrial order and to challenge and ultimately eliminate or unmake a technology-based industrial civilization. (Gottlieb 1993, 195-196; see also Naess 1995 and Devall 1994)

Ty's recollection of losing all interest in environmentalist issues while serving his prison sentence demonstrates that his role as an "eco-warrior" was motivated less by strongly internalized deep ecological principles than by feeling deeply wounded and wronged by the events that followed the failed protest action against the lumber company in the Siskiyou in 1989 - by his humiliation at the hands of the police and the courts, and by his loss of custody of his daughter Sierra.

In other passages of *A Friend of the Earth* such critical assessment of radical environmentalist stances is tied to conflicting concepts of masculinity. Many of Ty's recollections of his time as a member of Earth Forever! reveal that his identity as an environmentalist was formed in confrontation with a concept of masculinity that Andrew Ross has called the concept of the "ecological superman" (1995, 167). The ecological superman is one of the latest manifestations of what historian Michael Kimmel has shown to be the most powerful concept of masculinity in the U.S. since the beginning of the nineteenth century, namely that of the self-made man, who according to sociologist Erving Goffman, usually bears the following attributes: "young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant,

father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (qtd. in Kimmel 1996, 5). Ross argues that this concept of masculinity has always supported white male dominance and has drawn its strength from its ability to “shape-change and morph the contours of masculinity to fit with shifts in the social climate” (1995, 172). The ecological superman is one of the latest transformations of this type of masculinity, and it has been characterized by its appropriation of the moral power of environmentalism.

The ecological superman in *A Friend of the Earth* is Teo van Sparks, one of the leading activists of Earth Forever!, who conforms to many of the attributes listed by Kimmel. Tierwater fails to conform to most of these attributes - he is, for example, of Jewish-Irish Catholic background, he has failed in securing his father’s business achievements, and in terms of looks and a record in sports he is no match for Teo. Since he does not fulfil the criteria of the successful self-made man, he regards van Sparks as a rival right from the beginning. The tension between the two men, and the tension between the two different types of masculinity they embody, becomes visible in one of the very first passages in which Tierwater introduces Teo. Here, Boyle again uses the narrative strategy of presenting an encounter with the abject:

This is Teo, Teo van Sparks, aka Liverhead. Eight years ago he was standing out on Rodeo Drive, in front of Sterling’s Fur Emporium, with a slab of calf’s liver sutured to his shaved head. He’d let the liver get ripe - three or four days or so - and then he’d tear it off his head and lay it at the feet of a silvery old crone in chinchilla or a starlet parading through the door in white fox. Next day he’d be back with a fresh slab of meat. Now he’s a voice on the E.F.! circuit (*Eco-Agitor*, that’s what his card says), thirty-one years old, a weightlifter with the biceps, triceps, lats and abs to prove it, and there isn’t anything about the natural world he doesn’t know. At least not that he’ll admit. (2001, 22)

By confronting the customers of Sterling’s Fur Emporium with processes that accompany the manufacture of leather and fur goods - namely the death and biological decomposition of the animals used - Teo tries to interrupt the successful performance of the strategy of abjection. He tries to further the case of animal rights activism by profiting from the effect that the customers are caught unawares, that they are shocked by the sight and the smells of the process of rotting. Teo’s purpose is to challenge their notions of self by exposing them to the abject - ideally in such a way that will make them refrain from wearing leather and fur products in the future. The fact, moreover, that Ty recalls this scene more than thirty years after the event testifies to

the possible impact of such an experience. At the same time, however, it points toward his strained relationship with this successful environmentalist that is affecting his sense of self even after Teo's death. His description bespeaks a response to Teo that is a mixture of disgust, fascination, and admiration; it indicates the challenge that the existence both of this man and the concept of masculinity that he embodied meant for Ty's notion of self. Ty's recollections show that in contrast to Teo he lacked - and in 2025-26 still lacks - such rationally controlled behaviour. His own actions, especially his acts of ecosabotage, are usually not well-planned, but sparked by powerful momentary emotions. He also lacks Teo's discipline and ambition - both in politics and in business affairs; instead, he usually enjoys being lazy and not getting involved in risky political manoeuvres.

The contrast between the two men becomes once more visible in descriptions of their behaviour during the failed protest action in the Siskiyou timber area that are focalized by Ty. After having spent several hours on the road, their feet in concrete, waiting for the lumber industry workers, the police, and, especially, the press to arrive, the physical and psychic stress begins to show for the four activists, Teo, Andrea, Sierra, and Ty. Recalling the situation, Ty remembers Teo as

a model of stoicism. Hunched over the upended bucket like a man perched on the throne in the privacy of his bathroom, his eyes roaming the trees for a glimpse of wildlife instead of scanning headlines in the paper, he's utterly at home, unperturbed, perfectly willing to accept the role of martyr, if that's what comes to him. Tierwater isn't in this league, and he'd be the first to admit it. His feet itch, for one thing - a compelling, imperative itch that brings tears to his eyes - and the concrete, still imperceptibly hardening, has begun to chew at his ankles beneath the armor of his double socks and stiffened jeans. He has a full-blown headache, too, the kind that starts behind the eyes and works its way through the cortex to the occipital lobe and back again in pulses as rhythmic and regular as waves beating against the shore. He has to urinate. Even worse, he can feel a bowel movement coming on. (32-33)

Teo appears as an embodiment of his strong will, of his ratio, and he conforms to the concept of the human as able to transcend its physical and emotional existence. Ty - whose mental and emotional equilibrium is threatened by the abject in this passage - falls victim to the demands of his body (and of his emotions as his behaviour demonstrates once the group is confronted with the timber workers and the police officers). His detailed recollections signal that he is aware of being unable to conform to the socially dominating concept of maleness, that his notion of self is challenged and in need of confirmation. Thus, from the beginning of their acquaintance Ty

reacts with suspicion. He is aware that Teo conforms to the socially most attractive concept of masculinity, and as a result he begins to watch closely the responses of his daughter Sierra, and, especially, of his wife, Andrea, to Teo van Sparks.

Another character that adds to Boyle's representation of successful environmentalists, who may be categorized as a "self-made man", is Philip Ratchiss, the wealthy American who supports Earth Forever! financially. After the failed Siskiyou action and its many disastrous results for the family, he provides Ty, Andrea, and Sierra with a refuge by allowing them to hide in his cabin in the woods. Ratchiss is introduced as a grotesque figure,

a strangely muscled man - muscled in all the wrong places, that is, ankles, wrists, the back of his head - with a bush-ravaged face and a stinging hook of a red and peeling nose stuck in the middle of it as if noses were purely accidental. He'd killed whole herds of animals. He drank too much (gin and bitters). In his blood he harbored the plasmodium parasites that gave rise to malaria. He was loud, boastful, vain, domineering. (123)

Later, the reader is provided with the story of Ratchiss's life. He grew up on Long Island, but then spent twenty years in East Africa as a professional game hunter because of a traumatizing experience: during a family wilderness trip to Yosemite National Park he had to watch a bear kill and devour his sister and badly injure his father (see 129-131). Confrontation with the abject - with violent, bloody, and painful death - is again used here for the purpose of demonstrating its significance for processes of identity formation. It is this traumatic experience that was formative in the creation of Ratchiss's dual identity as a wildlife hunter and an environmentalist. Moreover, the fact that Ty and the other listeners are shocked and at the same time fascinated by this story implicitly once again raises questions concerning the formation of an environmentalist identity in general. Ratchiss's experience with a violent, indifferent "nature" forbids any idealization of the wilderness experience, it rejects a simplistic reading of the deep ecologist call for identification with nature. The notion that an environmentalist identity has to rest first and foremost on a love of wilderness is dismissed.

Of central importance for the argument of this essay is, however, that Ty's suspicious attitude toward the "ecological superman" Teo van Sparks and his irritation concerning Philip Ratchiss hint at a political danger that Andrew Ross addresses in his essay. Ross argues that the ecological superman is one more example of creating "heroic, white male identities" such as "the frontiersman, the cowboy, the

Romantic poet, the explorer, the engineer, the colonizer, the anthropologist, the pioneer settler, and so on” (1995, 174), and he voices his fear that this type of environmentally informed masculinity will be instrumentalized to thwart the efforts made by environmentalist stances that do not focus on issues of wilderness preservation. Preservation-directed environmentalism, Ross claims, “is geared toward direct, untrammelled encounters with ‘wilderness’, as opposed to the more left utopian version which sees the congeries of scarcity politics, risk management, and sustainability regulation as a conceptual gridlock through which we must struggle before an ecological society develops” (170). Ultimately, he wonders whether the concerns of advocates of environmental justice and of ecofeminism (which centre on issues such as urban pollution and on the fact that women, children, and poor people of colour are disproportionately affected by environmental hazards) might be silenced.

In *A Friend of the Earth* environmental justice and ecofeminist concerns are, in fact, a telling absence. Tierwater does not mention them in any of the passages in which he delineates the ideas and activities of the Earth Forever! people. On the contrary, in a passage in which one of his renewed attempts at monkey wrenching in the 1990s is described, Ty formulates the most extreme anti-humanist position that radical environmentalism has been capable of. On his way to the site where he plans to commit an act of ecosabotage, he gets involved in a mass car crash. Already infuriated by the dirt and debris he finds scattered on the highway, he becomes even more furious about the situation when he is hit by the car behind him. As a result, he accuses the rest of his society indiscriminately of polluting and destroying their environments:

The smog was like mustard gas, burning in his lungs. There was trash everywhere, scattered up and down the off-ramp like the leavings of a bombed-out civilization, cans, bottles, fast-food wrappers, yellowing diapers and rusting shop carts, oil filters, Styrofoam cups, cigarette butts. The grass was dead, the oleanders were buried in dust [...]. Sure, there were individuals out there, human beings worthy of compassion, sacrifice, love, but that didn't absolve them of collective guilt. There were too many people in the world, six billion already and more coming, endless people, people like locusts, and nothing would survive their onslaught. (240-241)

The passage echoes radical environmentalists' arguments “about the value of AIDS, Third World starvation, and even nuclear war as a form of population control” (Gottlieb 1993, 198). At this moment Tierwater is not aware of the fact that he has often been a part of

American consumerist society; and he is not aware of the fact that he loves driving his car as probably most of the others on the highway do; and he is also not aware of his privileged position as a well-off, white, middle-class person who lives comfortably in a Californian suburb. When he talks about “collective guilt”, he refers to “them”. He thereby distances himself from the rest of society and assumes a superior position. He completely disregards that people in his society - and people globally, for that matter - lead different lives and that differences in terms of class, ethnicity, and gender lead to very different degrees of contribution to environmental degradation. This collective of people, which he defines in this emotional outburst, becomes a threatening, polluting “other” that needs to be abjected for the purpose of guaranteeing the existence of a bearable notion of self. It becomes part of an abject that Tierwater tries to “thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 1982, 3).

In *A Friend of the Earth*, Boyle’s strong reliance on the narrative means of encounters with the abject works well for the purpose of presenting a subjectivity that might be typical of life after a global environmental catastrophe. It does not only shed light on the function of abjection in general, on its function to allow the human being to resist life-threatening forces and fortify his or her sense of self, but in addition to that draws special attention to its specific implications in an environmentally precarious situation. It shows that abjection may involve the repression of the insight that many of these forces are, in fact, human-made. In the case of environmental catastrophe it calls for the recognition and the acknowledgement of the fact that the threats to the health of body, soul, and mind, which result from climate change, are anthropogenic to a large extent.

By highlighting the impact of abjection for the creation of human subjectivity and for the processes of identity formation in the characterization of his protagonist Ty Tierwater, Boyle’s novel ultimately points successfully toward many issues that are crucial for early twenty-first-century environmentalism: it envisions what ecological collapse might mean for human (and animal) sensual, bodily perception and it addresses the issue of local, regional, and global spatial experience. In pointing out the pivotal problems of dualistic ontological thought and its ethical consequences, the novel raises the question of how a notion of “progress” should be defined; thereby it critically reflects and deconstructs the gendered quality of contemporary environmentalism.

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